

## PETER'S POINTERS

Peter's Pointers—April, 2005

### COMPARING MIND

We live in a very competitive culture where status is determined by who has the most money, who won the game or the argument. We are also plagued by self-criticism, often judging our life experiences unmercifully. These mental states generate much suffering. Buddhism has something to offer for alleviating this distress.

Another term in Buddhist psychology associated with “comparing mind” is *conceit*, an old English word meaning something imagined, fanciful, perhaps even delusional. We frequently think of conceit as arrogant, grandiose and filled with entitlement—the world should be as my conceit dictates. This is accurate, but conceit can also apply to self-loathing. Through conceit, there is a repeated judgmentalism, critical when the ideal is unfulfilled. This conceit is a root cause of suffering, as it finds ways to relate each moment of experience to an imagined, ideal self. The Buddha said that the core of human suffering is derived from the false notion, the *conceit*, that there is a separate self, that is compared to others.

The mind's normal, untrained mode of operating perceives an organizer, the self, that must be defended or gratified. This subjective experience compares, on a moment-by-moment basis, different ego states, judging one against the other. These comparisons can be on a large scale, i.e., comparing wealth, professional achievement, athletic accomplishment, or physical attractiveness—the list goes on and on. On a small scale, this moment of itching on the face is compared with the last moment of serene breath awareness, or this moment of peaceful clarity is compared with the prior moment of painful confusion. These moments tumble into one another, similar to the way dominoes, stacked on end in a line, can knock one another over. This results in a harsh internal landscape, one ego state competing with other ego states, with no respite.

This process is deeply conditioned in the human psyche. Infants are not born comparing on a large scale—they simply react to different sensory input. If the input is pleasant, they want more. If the input is unpleasant, they protest. This is comparing mind on the small scale. As the ego evolves, repeated exposure to our competitive and critical culture indoctrinates the child's mind, building upon the pleasant or unpleasant reactions to create an elaborate process of comparing on the large scale. Comparing today's experience to yesterday's, my performance to yours, my status to your status creates an imbalance, and insecurity about winning and losing that can become as absurd and dangerous as road rage.

The Buddha developed a system of observing inner processes that liberates the mind from this comparing. Using concentration, mindfulness and equanimity, the illusion of the ego's demand for supremacy is investigated and deconstructed in a way that reveals there is no enduring ego to be judged, gratified or defended.

Concentration allows the mind to be stable and disciplined in observing experience. Initially, concentration is developed through breath awareness, focusing intently on the arising and passing away of the breath sensations at the tip of the nostrils, repeatedly turning attention away from other mental objects. This creates tranquility in

the mind, and the effort to stay focused on the breath increases discipline. The mind becomes less agitated.

Mindfulness, combined with concentration, supports being clearly aware of phenomena and less identified with transient objects. Being mindful of the arising and passing away of the ever-changing breath sensations more and more precisely cultivates clear awareness of the transient nature of mental objects, moment by moment (remember the dominoes knocking each other over?). This observation process does not compare one breath sensation to another—there is simply clear awareness of the sensation as it is. Then there is another moment of sensation that can be determined, without judgment or criticism. The simplicity of breath awareness lends itself to not comparing mind-moments. The neutrality of breath sensations supports non-reactivity in the mind. How do we do this noticing without falling into comparing? Through the practice of equanimity.

Equanimity is the balance of different mental processes, revealed by mindfulness, disciplined by concentration. Observation is balanced with non-reactivity. The observing doesn't turn into obsession. The mind doesn't react to the demand of pleasant or unpleasant feelings. When a mental event occurs without equanimity, the untrained mind identifies with the arising thought or image, then acts on the accompanying pleasant or unpleasant urgency. Mindfulness reveals the arising thought without this identification, like seeing each domino clearly, rather than the blurred images as the line of dominoes falls. Concentration supports the steadfast application of mindfulness, investigating each moment as a condition of the mind, not a self to be compared to another self, or even to the next moment of experiencing.

Equanimity provides a non-reactive spaciousness that allows enough perception to identify the object, but without attachment to it, and enough energy to experience the pleasant or unpleasant attributes of the moment without acting on the urgency of the feelings. The mind is in a dynamic balance. Equanimity has no preference; it simply opens to the moment.

Buddhism describes a wholesome mental quality called *discriminating mind*, which is the capacity to recognize the difference between wholesome and unwholesome mental states, supporting the alleviation of suffering. How can one tell the difference between wise discrimination and comparing mind?

With comparing mind, there is an attachment, a “stickiness” to the mental event. Attention is captured through craving and clinging, and the self is coalesced around this attachment, elaborating a story and reacting impulsively. With wise discrimination, there is a clear awareness of the event, without the attachment. Through concentration, mindfulness and equanimity, there is the opportunity for a very brief moment of reflection that assesses the degree of urgency and mental preoccupation without action and, through prior study of Buddhist principles, an intention to let go of the attachment. This prior study results from a reasoned understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

How does wise discrimination affect comparing mind? When the three factors—concentration, mindfulness and equanimity are present, the operating mode of the mind shifts significantly. The mind becomes more buoyant, less “stuck” on an experience, and more adept at shifting attention from moment to moment. In addition,

the mind is more tranquil and workable, more disciplined, more capable of seeing events without the burden of self-centeredness.

At this point, some interesting things happen: The urgency of the moment diminishes, softens. The perceived need for the ego to be gratified and defended becomes more transparent and less demanding. This alleviates the burden of comparing one ego state to another, one “self” to another. It becomes more clear that what arises in the mind is impersonal, controlled by prior mental conditioning, and does not demand action the way we imagine it to. The mind simply stops being so invested in comparing one ego state to another. It is noticed, but instead of being a criticism or judgment it remains just an observed object. I hope that these observations help you find a way to let go of the craving and clinging that causes so much suffering.

## MINDFULNESS AND CHRONIC ILLNESS

Those of you who know me are aware that I share from my own experience to express what I am learning from my meditation practice, with the hope of making abstract concepts concrete and useful to others. In this light, let me tell you of my recent experiences with physical illness. On March 16 I unexpectedly was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, a chronic disease that can have serious long-term negative health consequences. This was quite a shock to me, as I have been very diligent about taking care of my health. Most diabetics of this type are obese, and I am not. That weekend was very difficult--I was often sick and tired and dispirited. Using my training in equanimity, mindfulness and self-inquiry, I watched how I processed this transition. The physical discomfort was difficult--the closer I examined my discomfort, the more strongly I felt it. The emotional turmoil was relentless--worrying, the "It's not fair, it shouldn't be happening to me!" stories, and so on. With persistent attention, however, I realized at a deeper level the Four Noble Truths--I was definitely suffering (the first Truth), physically and emotionally, and just wanted to go to sleep to avoid it (insomnia prevented that). I was aware of the energy of attachment and aversion that kept pulling me back into my drama about what is happening to my body (the second Truth). I kept practicing letting go of the attachment to the belief that I can ultimately control and prevent illness, and my aversion to the unpleasantness in my body and thoughts. I discovered that when I examined this deeply enough, while lying curled up in a ball under the covers, an awareness of deep peacefulness would come and go. In addition, I became much more deeply aware that my struggles, with illnesses and in other areas of my life, are born from a belief that I can hold on to a self that never gets sick, never feels disappointed, and so on. Here is the pointer: To find freedom from suffering, it is important to learn how to work with suffering--to not run away from it when it visits. Instead of running away from it, I examined my selfing story closely to notice that it is the obsession with following the script that is the problem and not the things that happen during the performance. When operating this way, I entered into the awareness and wisdom that manifests through the fourth Truth, the path to awakening.

## LEARNING TO PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

An old wisdom saying remarks that “The goal of spiritual practice is to pray without ceasing”. In Buddhism, skillful practice includes learning how to be mindful

while walking, standing, sitting, and reclining. What is the object of this persistent mindfulness?

The goal of the practice is to notice, with as much continuity and clarity as possible, just how the mind is inclining. If the mind is inclining toward acting on greed, to instead incline toward generosity or renunciation. If the mind is inclining toward ill will, to instead incline the mind toward good will and lovingkindness. If the mind is inclining toward doing harm, to instead incline the mind toward harmlessness. This obviously requires constant application.

The trick, then, is to cultivate consistent mindfulness during sitting meditation, and then to apply this skill in the other circumstances of life. Here are some strategies for generalizing mindfulness in your daily routines (assuming the you are “priming the pump” with sitting meditation as well): Spend some time analyzing your daily activities to find practice opportunities.

If you drive to work, use waiting in traffic as an opportunity to practice “eyes open” meditation. If you ride to work, meditate during the ride. If you sit in a chair during the day, take a few minutes of down time to feel your body in the chair, and use that as a cue to wake up mindfulness.

For a while I used an hourly chime on my watch as a mindfulness reminder. If you are on your feet a lot, use the walking or standing routines of your work activities to encourage mindfulness. Notice how your body starts to move—how weight gets shifted from one leg to the other. Let reaching out for a doorknob signal the start of a few moments of mindfulness.

The purpose of these strategies is to allow you to explore how the mind is responding to decisions during the day—is the inclination toward desire, ill will or harmfulness? If so, use mindfulness to change that action and create more peace in the world.

## THE FIVE HINDRANCES

Recently I have been practicing noticing and addressing the mental formations that condition the mind toward wholesome or unwholesome states. The most common way of organizing awareness of unwholesome consciousness states is called “the five hindrances”. They are sense desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and skeptical doubt.

I want to share with you a brief review of these states, and some specific suggestions about how to overcome them. First of all, a clarification: a brief experience of anger, desire, or doubt that comes and goes in a few seconds is not a hindrance. Becoming attached the introduction of the thoughts and dwelling on them creates the hindrance. All of them represent turbulence and instability in the mind and interfere with good functioning. All of them visit whether you're meditating or not; awareness of them just becomes amplified during meditation.

Sense desire is any fantasy or sensory experience that has a pleasant, alluring feeling associated with it. The desires become amplified through the ongoing preoccupation, pulling the fantasy along.

Ill-will is always fear-bound, whether it is labeled as anger, fear, pain, etc. The fear is associated with the delusion that the state is permanent and unchanging. Ill-will

can arise in association with sense desire when pleasant feelings are threatened. This is the famous "love-hate" relationship.

Sloth and torpor are mental dullness and physical lethargy, respectively. It happens when the internal censoring conditioners of the mind are triggered off. It's almost like a circuit breaker in the mind that gets tripped off, shutting down the mental processes. The dominant theme is mental inertia--it's just too hard to think.

Restlessness and remorse are two different states that are often found in combination. Restlessness is always present when unwholesome mind states are operating, and remorse occurs when the conscience is not clear, or you are attached to an expectation of responsibility (which may or may not be justified).

Skeptical doubt is indecisiveness in the mind, a lack of conviction. It may be conditioned by insufficient information but is more often associated with fear of making the wrong choice, or of committing to action that may be difficult.

As regards skillful means for overcoming the hindrances, there are several options. Mindfulness is always the first choice of antidotes. When mindfulness is present, there can be no unwholesomeness in the mind.

Along with mindfulness, investigating the mental states is helpful. Investigating means looking below the surface content of the hindrance and noticing objectively that a hindrance is present. For example, noticing the predominant feel of desire, and realizing that the content is running as a justification for the feeling, as when someone replays a favorite song lyric in the mind. Noticing the feeling breaks attachment to the content.

Training the mind to be agile and disciplined is another strategy. The ability to very quickly notice the pending arising of a hindrance and disidentifying with it immediately can be very effective. It's like hearing someone you don't like knocking on the door, and, instead of impulsively inviting them in, you simply notice that the person is there, but steadfastly refuse to open the door.

There are more suggestions for dealing with the hindrances specifically, but too extensive for this article. For more information, look in *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, by U Silananda, p. 96 ff.

## JHANA PRACTICE

I recently (Summer, 2000) returned from a 10-day retreat themed around the concentrated state of the mind called "jhana", and would like to share some of the information and insights I gained from the experience.

First of all, there are 8 jhanas reported in Buddhist scriptures. The Buddha learned how to attain these states during the 6 years of training he underwent before his enlightenment. In many of the suttas, concentrating the mind to experience jhana is a preliminary for practicing vipassana, which is what we call "insight meditation".

Many teachers of vipassana do not teach jhana attainments or encourage their students to take on the training. This may be due to historical bias, or due to unreasonable fears that someone's spiritual development will be hampered by the intensity of the jhana experiences. I want to share this information with the belief that being well-informed about options is important, whether someone practices attaining jhana or not.

The first goal in attaining jhana is to suppress the 5 hindrances: sense desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and skeptical doubt. This is achieved

through practicing the virtues of right speech, right action and right livelihood, and through developing access concentration.

Access concentration involves aiming the attention at a point of focus and sustaining that focus for long periods of time. This point of focus can be in as many as 30 categories, but the ones that are most relevant to our practice would be focus on the sensations of breathing or on lovingkindness. One understands that access concentration has been achieved with breath awareness when the breath becomes very subtle--shallow, brief, barely perceptible. This is accomplished by a very persistent returning to the breath, eliminating any object of awareness other than the changing sensations at the rim of the nostrils, and picking the smallest focal point of awareness of breath sensations for a powerfully curious investigation of the changing nature of the sensations at that point. With lovingkindness, the point of focus is on the joy one feels around the heart and head while persistently repeating a mantra, such as "may I be safe, may I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be content", or the variation that substitutes the word "we" for the word "I". Once again, this attention is exclusive--any thought that arises is disregarded and attention is resumed on the mantra and the feelings around the heart.

When this practice is successful, pleasant feelings will arise somewhere in the body or a clear white light will arise with eyes closed. At that point, the focus of concentration becomes the feeling or the light, and the meditator becomes increasingly absorbed in the new object, once again, to the exclusion of any distracter. One will notice that, with continued concentration, the pleasant feeling spreads as the concentrated focus is moved through the body, or that the light takes up more and more subjective "space" in the mind. At this point, one is entering the first jhana. As this feeling grows, a feeling of joy arises, to the point of a strong urge to smile or even with the onset of tears of gratitude. This is the fulfillment of the first jhana.

The second jhana begins when the rapturous feelings become saturated throughout the body, and the intense joy subsides. At this point, any distractions are easily disregarded, because the attention is attracted by the pleasantness of the jhana. In addition, the mind becomes "unified" in that there is an easily maintained coherence of awareness that is undisturbed and clear of any extraneous thoughts.

Upon entering the third jhana, the pleasant feeling subsides, the joy changes into a feeling of equanimity and serenity, and the unification of the mind becomes more stable and refined.

Upon entering the fourth jhana, the joy subsides, to be supplanted by strong equanimity and unification of the mind, with none of the reactivity to sensation that the mind would identify as pleasure or discomfort.

These four jhanas are typically what are referred to in the suttas regarding Right Concentration as part of the Noble Eightfold Path. There are four more mentioned as "formless jhanas" that are not relevant to this article.

The purpose of jhana attainment is not to experience the altered states, as appealing as they may be. In fact, a person can be distracted from practicing insight meditation because of the pleasantness of the experience. This may be why seeking this training is discouraged. However, in the suttas and commentaries, the value of jhana practice is made quite clear.

In order to attain the jhana, concentration must be very steady and continuous. The resultant consciousness is free of hindrances, very calm and clear, especially

regarding the fourth jhana. The recommendation is to attain the fourth jhana (or at least the first), then go back to access concentration with an intention to practice noticing the arising and passing away of conditioned states of mind, which is vipassana practice.

By report, jhana competency makes vipassana practice more powerfully insightful, increasing the possibility of experiencing the first stage of enlightenment in this lifetime. I sincerely hope that this information has helped you along your path to freedom from suffering.

p.s. For more information about jhana practices, here is a website address:

<http://go.to/leighb>

#### A NEW LOVINGKINDNESS MANTRA

I recently (September, 2000) attended a one-week lovingkindness retreat with Marcia Rose, a teacher associated with the Insight Meditation Society. I experienced some significant insights that have shifted the focus of my practice to being primarily based around combining lovingkindness, mindfulness and right livelihood.

Let me review the lovingkindness mantra and share how and why I changed it during the retreat. The mantra I have used and taught is "May I be safe, may I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be content".

I have used this for years and with good results. However, I have noticed in my daily living I still am vulnerable to fits of rage directed toward myself when I make mistakes, especially when working with my hands on a project. Even after years of meditation, counseling and recovery practices, it still happens, although with much less frequency and intensity.

Marcia mentioned the success that a meditator on a different retreat had experienced using the mantra "May I love myself just as I am right now". I added this, and modified my mantra as follows: "May I be safe, may I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be content. May I love myself completely and with great kindness, just as I am, no matter what happens."

I also decided to repeat this mantra during my daily routine, using mindfulness to notice when my body or emotions are signaling the onset of the tension that becomes self-loathing. I want to consecrate my activities to increasing kindness and harmony, whether I'm cutting a board, finding lost keys, or having to retrace my steps to get another tool I forgot. *My real task is to love myself, regardless of what the project is that I am involved in.*

I believe this strategy has enormous potential for changing my view of myself, and as that change occurs, to be able to accept all of life with a more open heart and mind. I hope that this sharing with you helps you find your path to freedom as well.

#### THE FIVE OPPORTUNITIES (THE HINDRANCES REVISITED)

The Buddha's teachings describe "the five hindrances" as states of mind that hinder stability, clarity and tranquility. The Buddha emphasized that the practice consists of being aware of suffering and, through skillful means, find liberation from suffering. Therefore, I would like to present the five opportunities that can arise through skillful means of meditative awareness when the hindrances arise.

*Sense Desire* is the first hindrance. The opportunity that this state of mind provides when mindful investigation occurs is a realization of the suffering that comes from the insatiable nature of the craving mind. Pleasant experience is very seductive—it is easy for the mind to be absorbed in the delight and the wanting. The opportunity here is to notice the Four Noble Truths in action.

First, acknowledge the suffering of desire, then realize the degree of attachment energy associated with the suffering, then relinquish that attachment, and, finally, realize the wisdom of being free from that desire. This is tricky, as the mind's condition is such that letting go of burning desire feels like suffering. The culmination of this first of the five opportunities is to feel at peace with not wanting.

*Aversion* is the second hindrance. This is the most obviously recognizable of the hindrances, experientially. Aversion is suffering. The opportunity here comes from how quickly and obviously the Four Noble Truths are realized. Aversion is actually the easiest hindrance to work with, once you recognize the opportunity that is there. Physical pain provides an opportunity for concentrating the mind, provided the pain is not too great. Loss is another opportunity to understand deeply the power of attachment in the mind. Resentment or hatred can make more obvious just how hot and destructive attachment can be, but only when there is enough mindfulness to see through the rationalizations around the anger.

*Sloth and Torpor* is the third hindrance. The sluggishness, heaviness and unworkability of this mental state is very difficult to apply skillful means to, as this hindrance is closely aligned with one of the root causes of suffering, that of ignorance or delusion. The mind is so inert and blind that it cannot recognize its own dullness. The opportunity here is to recognize the contrast between the clarity of mindfulness and concentration as the antidote for dullness and superficiality in the mind.

This hindrance is so ever-present that you can't understand the extent of it until you have been on a long meditation retreat and cultivated enough mindfulness and concentration. At that point, you are capable of investigating mental states with enough clarity to see just how dull and delusional the mind is in the normal operating mode. The opportunity here is to practice investigation of mental states and make attention more crisp and clearly aware.

*Restlessness and Remorse* is the fourth hindrance. The mind is agitated and unfocused, filled with worry and regret. The opportunity with this hindrance is to see clearly with mindfulness just how uncontrollable the mind is in its normal, untrained state.

As with *Sloth and Torpor*, it is not clearly understood just how agitated the mind is until tranquility and stability are attained with concentration practice. Additionally, there is an opportunity to appreciate the value of living a virtuous life, an important segment of the Noble Eightfold Path, that is, Wholesome Speech, Wholesome Action and Wholesome Livelihood.

*Skeptical Doubt* is the fifth hindrance. This is indecision in the mind, an inability to commit to wholesome intention. The mind wavers, arguing between two or more alternative perceptions, becoming more or less immobilized. The opportunity here is to cultivate intentional mental activity, investigating the processes of the mind actively, rather than holding back and not cultivating discipline and wisdom.

To summarize, the five hindrances are the very ground from which wisdom can grow. The opportunity is to bring mindful awareness to the process, to see the struggles of the mind not as failures or obstacles, but the very building blocks that move us forward spiritually. I hope these comments have helped you find ways to peace, clarity and good will in this life.

#### GETTING THE BEST SUPPORT FROM A TEACHER

When I began my meditation practice, there was no teacher conveniently available. Fortunately, I was diligent enough and free enough to go to intensive retreats every year, and kept well informed and inspired with reading.

Now, there are opportunities for accessing a teacher through email as well as in person. It is common knowledge that having ready access to a competent teacher is invaluable--it speeds up spiritual development and minimizes errors, which, when unaddressed, can create a distorted sense of spiritual training and accomplishment.

Here are some pointers that I hope will be of service in selecting and learning from a teacher:

When seeking a teacher, find out:

- 1) How long has the teacher been practicing meditation? Does she or he have a regular sitting routine and does she or he go on retreats with some frequency?
- 2) Does she or he have a teacher?
- 3) How well informed is the teacher regarding Buddhist psychology and Buddhist meditation practices? Does the teacher exemplify virtuous living sufficient to create and maintain trust? Is the teacher humble or does he or she display haughtiness and self-absorption?
- 4) Does the teacher's style meet your needs? Regarding this, consider whether the teacher acts like a surrogate parent (some folks respond well to this), or whether the teacher presents as a spiritual friend, someone who is self-disclosing and knowledgeable without being on a pedestal. Of course, an excellent teacher will be able to respond differently to different folks' needs. A good teacher will also be willing to be accessible, especially before and after retreats.

To get the greatest benefit from the teacher, here are some pointers:

- 1) Be diligent and persistent in your meditation practice. Don't expect the teacher to magically create insights for you. If your practice is slowed or stopped, ask for help and be willing to listen non-defensively.
- 2) Support the teacher through participation in the community and through generosity. Teachers are in an awkward position regarding material support in that the teachings are offered without a stated fee or compensation, so thoughtful and caring consideration of her or his needs is important.
- 3) Be willing to think carefully but non-defensively about the teacher's observations and suggestions. This practice is not based on blind faith, but rather through well-informed inquiry. If you do have doubts, back them up with research, either from your own practice or from reading reputable teachers and scholars.
- 4) Maintain a steady contact with the teacher that is mutually agreeable to both parties. Don't wait for a spiritual emergency to seek a teacher's support. The growth of your spiritual practice is enhanced to the extent that the teacher has a deeper sense of how you see yourself and your options for living.

Be careful to avoid gossiping about the teacher. It is not uncommon for persons in leadership to be unfairly criticized by individuals in the community. If you have concerns about the teacher's attitudes or behaviors, talk with her or him about it. Don't participate in or support idle or malicious talk--that constitutes unwholesome.

## THE SELFING STORY

I want to share with you a concept I call “the selfing story”. The Buddha talked of the fourth foundation of mindfulness, focusing attention on mental objects. Mental objects are the ideas and images through which one experiences life and develops strategies for action.

This process is dynamic, with images and perceptions flowing like a stream. It is derived from memories, and the most emotionally potent memories are the most likely to emerge into conscious awareness, like clouds arising in the sky. These cloudlike thoughts, driven by emotional urgency, determine behavior and new karma.

The term selfing story suggests that the ego-generating process is constantly developing, as a verb describes action, and, at the same time, seems like a noun, describing a personality. The selfing story is both and neither.

Most of the selfing story is unwholesome, that is, it is conceived through and controlled by greed, aversion and delusional thinking. As the unwholesome story arises, the mind, through ignorance, identifies with it as a valid and useful rendering of reality, when in actuality is a product of grasping at perceptions to justify one's fears and desires.

When mindfulness and other wholesome mental factors are brought into the process, the selfing story changes in positive ways, manifesting generosity, good will and wisdom. Being mindful of how the selfing story unfolds helps in recognizing how plastic and creative the mind is, and provides opportunities to see through the demands of the ego and take a different, more wholesome route that decreases suffering in life.

Essentially, this supports making better choices that are less conditioned and less ego defensive. Ultimately, the progression of insights that lead to enlightenment reveals that even the wholesome selfing story is an illusion, simply the manifestation of certain mental factors with no permanent and reliable self. With that realization, the mind experiences nirvana, the unconditioned.

I hope this concept serves you well upon your path to awakening.

## THE FOUR NOBLE EFFORTS

In Buddhist psychology, there are three application of effort. The first one is instigative effort. This is always present and is the effort of the mind to go to an object. It initiates attention and behavioral responses. It can be wholesome or unwholesome.

The second is sustained effort. This is also ever-present and is the effort of the mind to sustain awareness on an object to examine it. Along with sustained effort is the potential for becoming attached to the object being examined, and this is unwholesome—it is a root cause of suffering. These two forms of effort operate in tandem.

By far, the most frequent occurrence of these two forms of effort is unwholesome, that is, conditioned by greed, ill-will or ignorance/delusional thinking.

The third form of effort is noble effort, or, as it is termed in the Noble Eightfold Path discourse.

The following represent these efforts:

*The Noble Effort of noticing the arisen unwholesome thought and renouncing it.* This reflects the effort to notice and interrupt thoughts generated by greed, hatred or ignorance.

*The Noble Effort of noticing unarisen unwholesome thoughts and prevent their arising.* This effort is more sophisticated, requiring deeper mindfulness that notices the potential arising of greed, hatred or ignorance, interrupting the developing cycle before the unwholesome thought is attached to or identified with.

*The Noble Effort to notice unarisen wholesome thoughts and support their arising.* This effort uses mindfulness to allow the antidotes to greed, hatred or ignorance to arise, those being generosity, lovingkindness and wisdom, in all their manifestations.

*The Noble Effort to notice already arisen wholesome thoughts and sustain their arising.* This effort is also a challenge, as it requires ongoing mindfulness, a vigilance that simply registers what has arisen without craving and clinging; and ongoing flow of just being with the moment. This final wholesome effort is what leads to liberation from suffering.

How can I cultivate the Four Noble Efforts? Every time that I notice that my mind is moving toward an unwholesome object and attaching to it, that noticing is mindfulness. Every time I am mindful and become non-attached to the unwholesome object I am practicing Right Effort. As I continue to monitor my arising thoughts with mindfulness and renunciation, wholesome states arise naturally, producing serenity and clarity. This is true whether or not I am formally meditating.

The benefits of Noble Effort include persistence, patience, less delusion in the mind and increasing joy and equanimity. This inevitably leads to the alleviation of suffering. I hope that you can cultivate noble effort and find more peace in your life.

## LITTLE MIND AND BIG MIND

Some time ago I was confronted with chronic back and shoulder pain. It is in remission right now, but it was an interesting point of practice. The pain was very persistent, day and night, and significantly interrupted my sleep. I value being physically active, and this made exercising with my upper body not possible. I related to the pain as I had been taught; that is to focus on the sensations consistently, with mindfulness. The emphasis is on letting go of the urgent aversion to the intensely unpleasant physical sensations, as well as the commentary that would co-arise with the sensations. This is a useful strategy, but not universally applicable. I had read and tried “Big Mind” practice, and it occurred to me to use this opportunity to apply it in this situation.

“Little Mind” occurs as the mind becomes tense and contracted when confronted with a strong mental object, whether physical or mental, pleasant or unpleasant. The mind becomes rigid, preoccupied and increasingly stressed. It can be overwhelming, even for an experienced meditator. One can easily slip from the above-mentioned practice of scanning the sensations with mindfulness, and instead suffer even more as a result of the enduring intensity of the experience. I think it would be reasonable to assume that “Little Mind” is the normal operating mode of human experience—the mind becomes trapped in identification with an arisen object of attention, and this increases the turbulence of consciousness and the lack of creative responsiveness that is characteristic of human suffering.

“Big Mind” is a strategy of very much broadening the internal focus of the mind so the unpleasant mental object is one of many, not the primary focus. I have heard this called “Big Sky Mind” as well, with the metaphor as seeing the strong sensations to be like clouds in the sky. Instead of focusing on the clouds, focus on the spaciousness of the sky. The sky is always much bigger than the clouds, and the clouds arise and pass away due to conditions of the sky, rather than as separate units of moisture. It is hard to do with significant, chronic pain unless you have already developed the ability to concentrate steadily on the breath. The strategy involves focusing steadily on consciousness, not the breath. Focusing on consciousness is like focusing on the sky.

This worked well for me during that time. Additionally, I had taken some muscle relaxing medication for several weeks. The doctor neglected to tell me to slowly reduce the dosage when my back condition improved, so when I stopped abruptly, my body had some very intense sensations that kept me from sleeping at night. I would lay in bed with intense energetic sensation flowing through the body, unable to stop it. I applied Bid Mind to this as well. Imagine that the sky is full of lightning, with clouds from horizon to horizon. Big Mind at this point sees the pervasive cloud cover as just an energetic layer of the much larger sky. This worked well for me too. Eventually, over a week or so, the sensations dissipated so I could sleep well.

To summarize, the Big Mind strategy focuses on the totality of consciousness, not the particulars, this lowers reactivity in the mind, allowing more equanimity and less of a tendency to personalize experiences. Instead, all events of the mind, physical, emotional and mental are just small phenomena; the totality of the mind is infinitely receptive and peaceful even when there are storms. I hope this is helpful for you on your path to wisdom.